

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1 1. A method of operating a communications device, the
2 method comprising:

3 accessing a voice message system;
4 retrieving, over a public telephone network, a
5 voice message from the voice message system;
6 generating a digital audio file representing
7 said message; and
8 sending, using at least one IP packet, the
9 digital audio file representing said message to a service
10 subscriber.

1 2. The method of claim 1, wherein sending the digital
2 audio file includes sending an E-mail to the service
3 subscriber with the generated audio file as a file
4 attachment to said E-mail.

1 3. The method of claim 1, wherein the step of accessing
2 a voice message system includes the steps of:
3 contacting said voice message system by placing
4 a call to said voice message system; and
5 controlling said voice message system by
6 transmitting at least one DTMF signal to said system.

1 4. The method of claim 3, wherein said at least one
2 DTMF signal is a password which is required to be

3 supplied to said voice message system before messages can
4 be retrieved.

1 5. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
2 receiving a reply to said E-mail message; and
3 deleting the retrieved message from said voice
4 message system in response to receiving said reply.

1 6. The communication method of claim 5, further
2 comprising:
3 prior to sending said E-mail message, storing
4 the retrieved voice message in a memory device from which
5 the service subscriber can retrieve messages by
6 telephone; and
7 in response to receiving said reply, deleting
8 the retrieved message from the memory device.

1 7. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
2 receiving an E-mail message including a
3 telephone number and an audio file; and
4 initiating a telephone call using said
5 telephone number.

1 8. The method of claim 7, further comprising:
2 monitoring to detect a speech signal followed
3 by a period of silence; and
4 upon detecting said period of silence, playing
5 the audio file.

1 9. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
2 storing a first prompt message; and
3 determining from subscriber input when the first
4 prompt message should be loaded onto said voice message
5 system.

1 10. The method of claim 9, further comprising:
2 placing a call to said voice message system;
3 and
4 loading said answering voice message system
5 with the first message.

1 11. The method of claim 10, further comprising the step
2 of:
3 determining from subscriber input when a second
4 prompt message should be loaded onto said voice message
5 system.

1 12. The method of claim 11, further comprising the step
2 of:
3 placing an additional call to said voice
4 message system; and
5 loading the second prompt message into said
6 voice message system.

1 13. The method of claim 9, wherein the step of
2 determining from subscriber input when the first prompt
3 message should be loaded includes the step of:

4 accessing a prompt message schedule generated
5 from subscriber input.

1 14. A method of controlling a voice message system,
2 comprising:

3 receiving an E-mail message indicating that a
4 voice message retrieved from said voice message system
5 and forwarded to a service subscriber was reviewed;

6 in response to receiving said E-mail message,
7 accessing said voice message system; and

8 controlling said voice message system to delete
9 said retrieved voice message.

1 15. The method of claim 14, wherein the step of
2 accessing said voice message system includes:

3 placing a telephone call to said voice message
4 system over a telephone network; and

5 sending a control signal to said voice message
6 system over said telephone network causing said retrieved
7 voice message to be deleted from said voice message
8 system.

1 16. The method of claim 15, wherein a voice message
2 retrieval and forwarding device is used to place said
3 call and to send said control signal, the method further
4 comprising the step of:

5 in response to receiving said E-mail message,
6 operating the voice message retrieval and forwarding
7 device to delete a copy of the retrieved voice message

8 from a storage device included in the voice message
9 retrieval and forwarding device.

1 17. The method of claim 15, further comprising the step
2 of:

3 operating a subscriber computer system to
4 automatically generate said E-mail message when a user of
5 the subscriber computer system accesses an E-mail message
6 which includes said retrieved message as an attached
7 audio file.

1 18. A method of updating prompt messages on a plurality
2 of voice message systems, comprising:

3 storing a plurality of prompt messages;
4 receiving information from a user identifying a
5 first one of said prompt messages and indicating that the
6 first one of said prompt messages should be loaded onto a
7 first remote voice message system;

8 accessing the first remote voice message
9 system; and

10 controlling the first remote voice message
11 system to store said first one of said prompt messages.

1 19. The method of claim 18,

2 wherein the step of accessing the first remote voice
3 message system includes:

4 placing a call to said first remote voice
5 message system; and

6 wherein the step of controlling the first
7 remote voice message system includes:
8 transmitting a DTMF signal to the first remote
9 voice message system.

1 20. The method of claim 19, wherein the information
2 received from the user includes scheduling information
3 indicating the time at which the first one of said prompt
4 messages should be loaded onto the first remote voice
5 message system and when a second one of said prompt
6 messages should be loaded onto the first remote voice
7 message system, the method further comprising:

8 accessing the first remote voice message system
9 when the schedule indicates that the second one of said
10 prompt messages should be loaded onto the first remote
11 voice messaging system; and

12 controlling the first remote voice message
13 system to store said second one of said prompt messages.

1 21. The method of claim 19, further comprising the step
2 of:

3 receiving an E-mail message from said user
4 including a prompt message as an attached audio file; and
5 adding the prompt message in said attached
6 audio file to said plurality of stored prompt messages.

1 22. The method of claim 18, wherein said step of
2 receiving information from the user includes:

3 receiving said information from the Internet.

1 23. The method of claim 19, wherein the information
2 received from the user includes information indicating
3 when a second one of said prompt messages should be
4 loaded onto a second remote voice messaging system, the
5 method further comprising:

6 accessing the second remote voice message
7 system when the information received from the user
8 indicates that the second one of said prompt messages
9 should be loaded onto the second remote voice messaging
10 system; and

11 controlling the second remote voice message
12 system to store said second one of said prompt messages.

1 24. A communication device, comprising:

2 means for accessing a voice message system;
3 means for retrieving a voice message from the
4 voice message system over a public telephone network;

5 means for generating an E-mail message
6 including the retrieved voice message as an attached
7 audio file; and

8 means for sending the E-mail message to a
9 service subscriber.

1 25. A device for controlling a voice message system,
2 comprising:

3 means for receiving an E-mail message
4 indicating that a voice message retrieved from said voice
5 message system and forwarded to a service subscriber was
6 reviewed;

7 means for accessing said voice message system
8 in response to receiving said E-mail message; and
9 means for controlling said voice message system
10 to delete said retrieved voice message.

1 26. An apparatus for updating prompt messages on a
2 plurality of voice message systems, comprising:
3 a memory device including a plurality of stored
4 prompt messages;
5 means for receiving information from a user,
6 said information identifying one of said prompt messages
7 stored in the memory and indicating that a particular one
8 of said prompt messages should be loaded onto a remote
9 voice message system;
10 means for accessing said remote voice message
11 system; and
12 means for controlling said remote voice message
13 system to store said particular one of said prompt
14 messages.

1 27. The apparatus of claim 26, wherein the means for
2 receiving information includes:
3 at least one of a modem and network interface
4 card.

1 28. The apparatus of claim 26, wherein the means for
2 accessing the first remote voice message system includes:
3 a DTMF signal generator.

1 29. A method of operating a communications device
2 coupled to a plurality of voice messaging systems, which
3 are physically distinct units from said communications
4 device, and to a computer system corresponding to a user
5 of the communications device, the method comprising the
6 steps of:

7 accessing the plurality of voice message
8 systems corresponding to the user;

9 retrieving voice messages from at least some of
10 the plurality of voice message systems; and

11 forwarding the retrieved voice messages to said
12 computer system using at least one IP packet per message.

1 30. The method of claim 29, wherein the step of
2 forwarding the retrieved messages includes:

3 generating at least one digital file including
4 audio data; and

5 transmitting said digital file to said computer
6 system.

1 31. The method of claim 30, wherein transmitting said
2 digital file to said computer system includes:

3 sending said digital file as an attachment to
4 an E-mail.

1 32. The method of claim 30, wherein said plurality of
2 voice message systems includes a first voice message
3 system located at a first premises and a second voice

4 message system located at a second premises which is
5 physically remote from said first premises.

1 33. The method of claim 32, wherein the step of
2 accessing the plurality of remote voice message systems
3 includes:

4 initiating a telephone call to the first voice
5 message system.

1 34. The method of claim 32, wherein the step of
2 accessing the plurality of remote voice message systems
3 includes:

4 establishing a digital communication channel
5 between said communications device and the second voice
6 message system; and

7 sending at least one IP packet to said second
8 voice message system to control said second voice message
9 system.

1 35. The method of claim 34, wherein the step of
2 accessing the plurality of remote voice message systems
3 further includes:

4 initiating a telephone call to the first voice
5 message system.